

LETTS TALK

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF DOCTOR WHO

A *Starburst* interview by David Bassom

Former actor turned writer/producer/director Barry Letts has been associated with *Doctor Who* for more than 25 years.



Barry Letts has worked with three Doctors: Jon Pertwee, Patrick Troughton and Tom Baker (Inset) Photos © BBC Video

LETTS made his first foray into the classic British Sci-Fi series as the director of *The Enemy of the World*, a 1967 Patrick Troughton adventure. As producer of the Jon Pertwee era between 1970 and 1974, he infused the show with a moral realism and was responsible for some of the most successful pieces of casting in its history, including that of the most popular Doctor of all, Tom Baker.

Letts later returned to the series to helm Baker in *The Android Invasion* and acted as executive producer of the show's eighteenth season. Last year, he wrote the highly acclaimed Radio 5 play *The Paradise of Death* and his eagerly awaited follow-up, *The Ghosts of N-Space*, makes its debut in January.

"It's very strange as I've never been a fan," Letts remarks of his legendary status in *Doctor Who* circles. "I think that if I had been, I wouldn't have been all that good a producer as I had to stand back and be objective about it. One of the reasons it was so successful when Terrance [Dicks, Script Editor] and I worked on it was that we did both enjoy it: we enjoyed the genre, the particular stories and thrashing out plans for each season. It was great fun to do and everyone was lovely."

Difficult Début

Polite, genial and always fascinating, Letts retains his enthusiasm for *Doctor Who* to this very day. Except, that is, when it comes to discussing his first encounter with the show, as the director of *The Enemy of the World*.

"It was a very unusual introduction to *Doctor Who*," he recalls. "I knew both Patrick Troughton and Frazer Hines, so that was great. The difficulties arose out of two things: the script situation, which was awful; and my direction, was over ambitious.

"When I arrived I expected six half-hour scripts and all I got was a draft script of episode one with a very rough synopsis of the remaining five episodes. I read the first script and it was unfilmable, it needed far more development and should never have got near the director. I was also appalled by the small amount of time I had to direct such a complicated



show, and what I should have done was simplify it and concentrate on the acting and drama but I didn't, I tried to come up with exciting ways of shooting **Doctor Who** and there just wasn't enough time to do it.

"The episode which survived and is on the Patrick Troughton tape is probably the worst episode of the six. I don't like looking at it. We did some other episodes which were far more fun and much more exciting."

A Classic Era

The Jon Pertwee years are widely regarded as a 'classic era' of **Doctor Who**. Unsurprisingly, Letts is more than happy to acknowledge their continued popularity.

"It's very gratifying indeed," he admits. "I think we did a good job and achieved what Terrance and I were aiming at. True, if I did it again, there are various things I would do differently; for example, I think we used far too high key lighting when it would have been better with naturalistic lighting, which would not only have made the show dramatically better but would also have covered up imperfections, such as those of the sets. Overall, though, I'm very pleased with it."

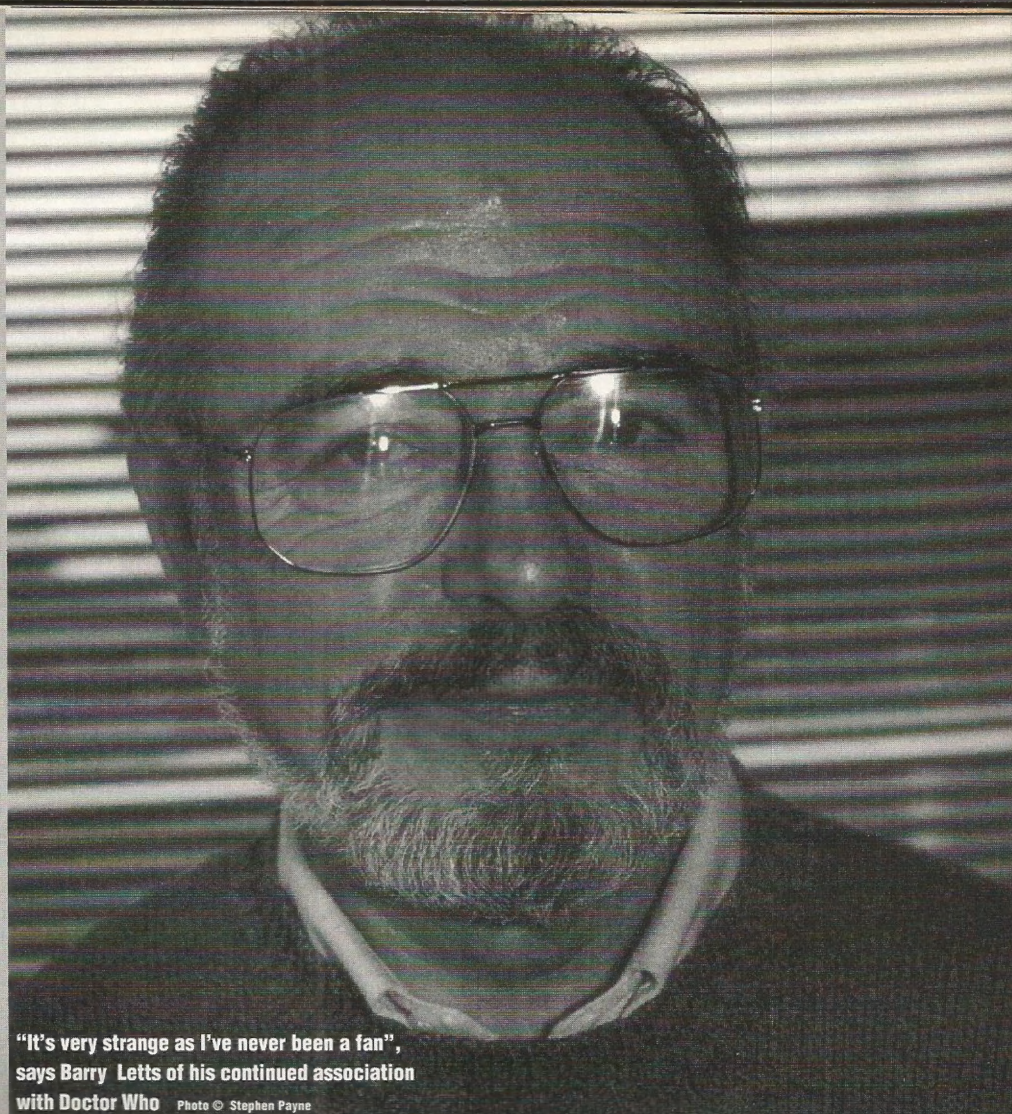
Space and Religion

When he took over as producer of **Doctor Who**, the stories were strictly Earthbound. Letts was determined to defy both the Time Lords and the BBC Accounts Department by sending the Doctor back into Space. "I prefer the show when the Doctor is on Earth with a Fantasy element like an alien invasion, but the essence of entertainment is variety and we felt constrained having to be on Earth all the time, so we were keen to get him back into Space."

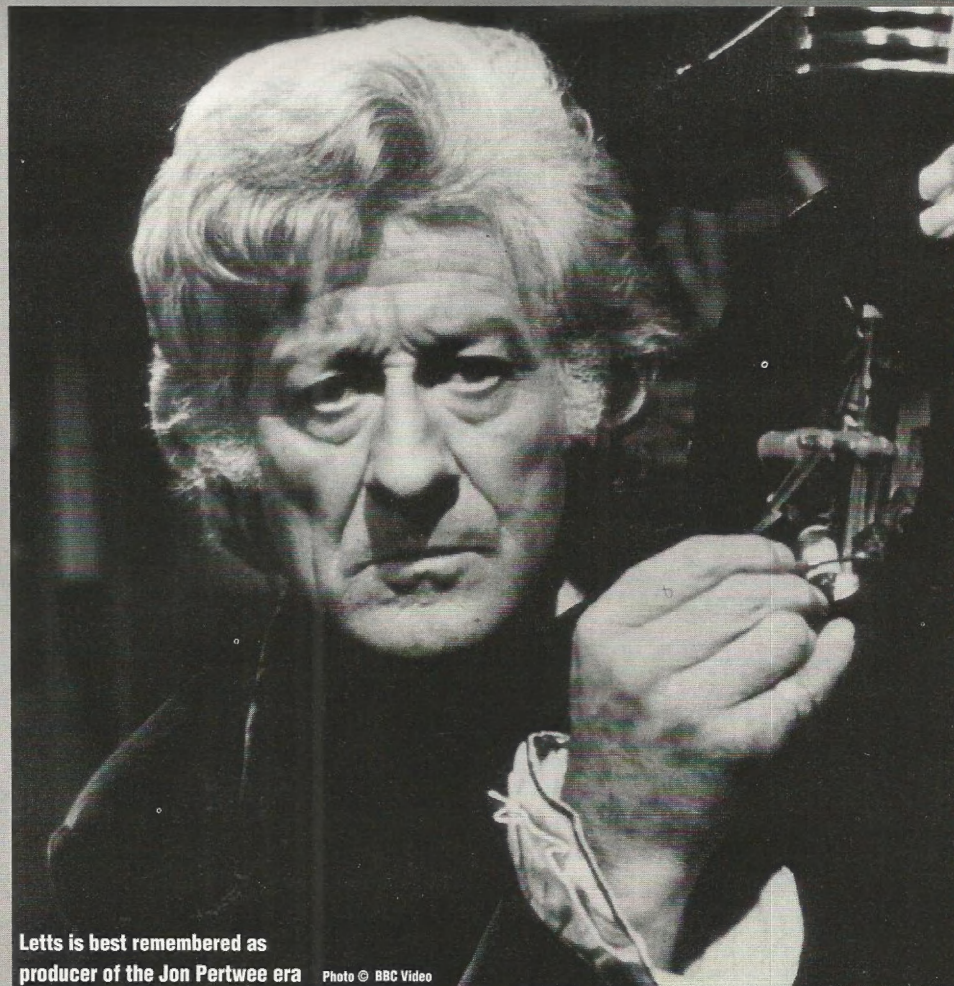
Letts also introduced several elements of Buddhist philosophy into the show. "I wasn't trying to proselytize, to turn people into Buddhists, it was simply because Buddhism was very much at the forefront of my mind at the time, and still is, so when I had anything to do with the writing I let it come forward. For instance, *The Planet of the Spiders* is an overt Buddhist parable."

Classic Casting

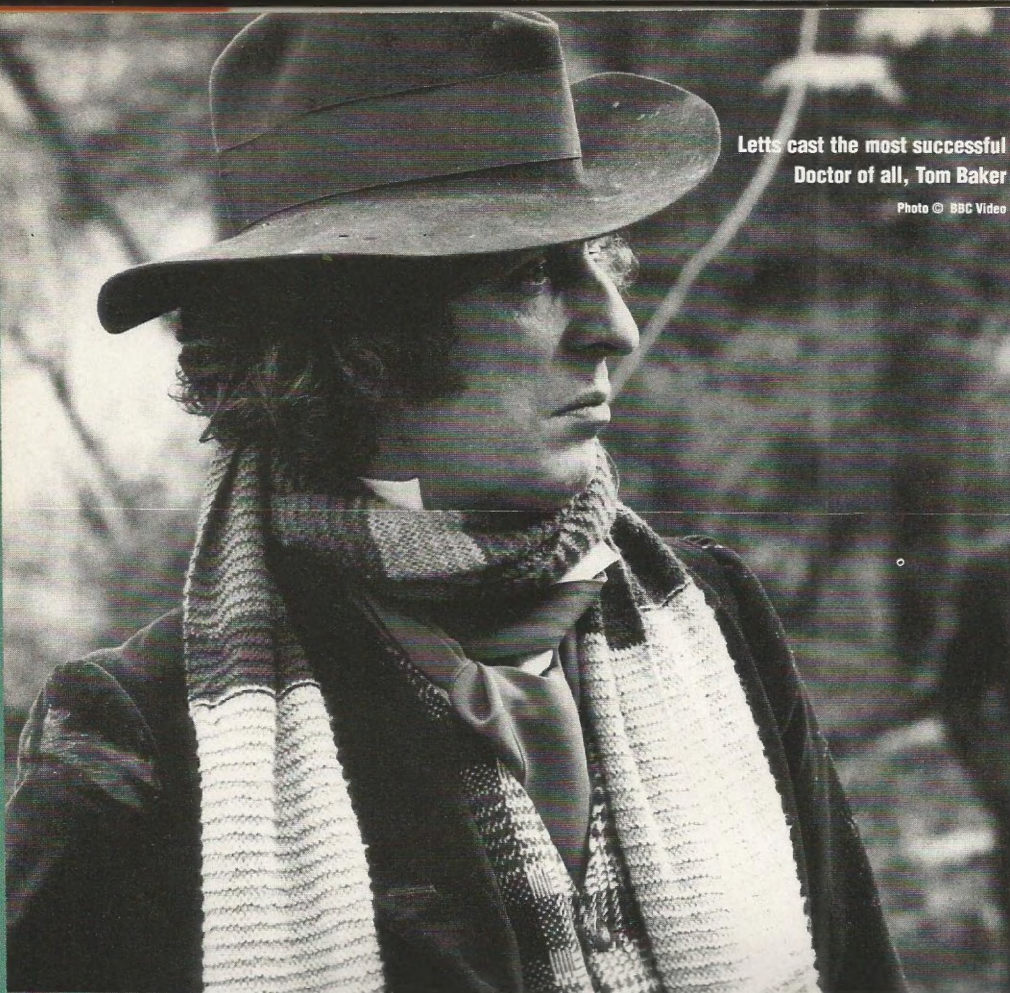
During his five-year tenure as producer, Letts cast two of the most popular companions, Jo Grant (Katy Manning) and Sarah Jane Smith (Elisabeth Sladen), the Doctor's ingenious antagonist The



"It's very strange as I've never been a fan", says Barry Letts of his continued association with **Doctor Who** Photo © Stephen Payne



Letts is best remembered as producer of the Jon Pertwee era Photo © BBC Video



Letts cast the most successful Doctor of all, Tom Baker

Photo © BBC Video

Master (Roger Delgado), and the most successful Doctor of all, Tom Baker. "Casting is enormously important. As a famous American director, Delbert Mann, once said, it is very easy to be a successful television director: all you need is a good writer and good actors and everybody will say how brilliant you are.

"One needed to work hard on these aspects, so when we needed a new companion, I let it be known among the agents what exactly I wanted. I then saw a vast number of girls, not just for ten minutes but three-quarters of an hour, for a reading and a chat. That way, I got myself down to a short-list of about half a dozen. I then wrote a scene which they rehearsed as part of a 'workshop' for two hours. Out of that I found Katy and Lis, and on both occasions, by sheer chance, they were the last actresses I saw."

The casting for the Master, however, was somewhat different. "As soon as we thought of the character, I said to Terrance 'I know somebody who would be perfect and that's Roger Delgado', because I'd worked with him a lot as an actor and knew him very well. That was it, we never considered anyone else."

Who will be Who?

Perhaps Letts's biggest casting challenge was finding Pertwee's successor. "Again, I let all the agents know that I was looking for someone who was a strong personality in his own right, probably something of an eccentric and a good actor. I didn't mind if they were a star or not.

"I told everyone 'I want to discuss with people the possibility of their playing **Doctor Who**, to see whether they like the idea and whether I like the idea, and I'll make up my mind at the end.' So I saw all kinds of people, including Michael Bentine, who was a strong contender but was ruled out because he wanted an input into the scripts, and Fulton Mackay, who we would have gone with if we hadn't found Tom.

"Tom was suggested by our then Head of Department Bill Slater, who arranged a lunch-time meeting at the BBC Club. I thought he would be an ideal Doctor if he could act, and I told him exactly that, and he told me to go and watch the last film he had made, *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*, which was in cinema at that time. Terrance and I went to see it that afternoon and Tom was superb,

Elisabeth Sladen



Katy Manning



Roger Delgado

Photo © A Beech



Day of the Daleks "I prefer the show when the Doctor is on Earth with a Fantasy element like an alien invasion," comments Letts

Photo © BBC Video

so I went back and I phoned him straight away and said 'Would you please play Doctor Who?'"

Dæmons and Doctors

Any interview with Letts would be incomplete without some reference to *The Dæmons*. Written by Letts and Robert Sloman under the pseudonym Guy Leopold, it is frequently cited as the very finest show in *Doctor Who*'s 27 year history.

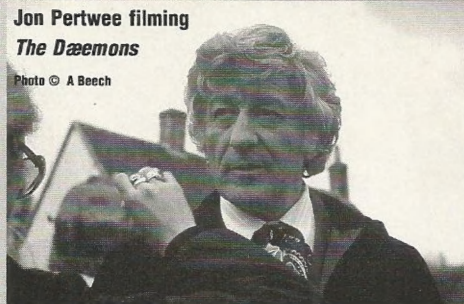
"It's nice to know that because it's one of my favourites," he smiles. It was the first one I wrote with Bob, and I want to make it absolutely clear that it was nothing other than a true collaboration between the two of us."

In another fan favourite, Letts managed to unite William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, and Jon Pertwee as *The Three Doctors*. "It was a nice idea, a gimmick to launch the season, and we worked out a rationale for it. I rang Patrick and he said was very keen and I then phoned Bill and he said 'Yes, I would love to do it.'

So we were getting ready, until a few weeks later, Bill's wife phoned and said 'He's far too ill, he's just not up to doing it.' Consequently, the episode had to be quickly rewritten to produce what finally went out on the screen, which was Bill on

Jon Pertwee filming
The Dæmons

Photo © A Beech



the monitor in scenes which were all pre-shot with him reading his lines from cards."

Devils and Spiders

He also managed to gain cooperation from the Navy for the shooting of *The Sea Devils*. "Before I joined they had briefly spoken to the Navy about possible co-operation so once we got the scripts for *The Sea Devils* under way I arranged a meeting with the Commanding Officer concerned. We obviously needed a diving ship so I told him when we would like to film in Portsmouth and he said 'We're supposed to be in Scotland then, but I'll change the schedule for you.' I then contacted the man at the Ministry of Defence the next day and thanked him for this, and he phoned me back and said 'You mustn't say we've changed the

schedule just for filming, that would cost you thousands of pounds! You must write to me asking when we will be in Portsmouth, which by sheer coincidence will fit in with filming.'"

As for Pertwee's final adventure, *The Planet of the Spiders*, Letts makes no apologies for *Doctor Who*'s most elaborate chase sequence ever. "It was great fun," he chuckles. "Over the period, Jon would always say 'I've just seen the most marvellous thing we could use,' and for his last show, we swept up all the suggestions that both he and I had made and wrote them into the story not only for a bit of fun but also for an in-joke. It made a nice chase. We missed one thing out, a hot air balloon, but we found it impossible to fit into the story."

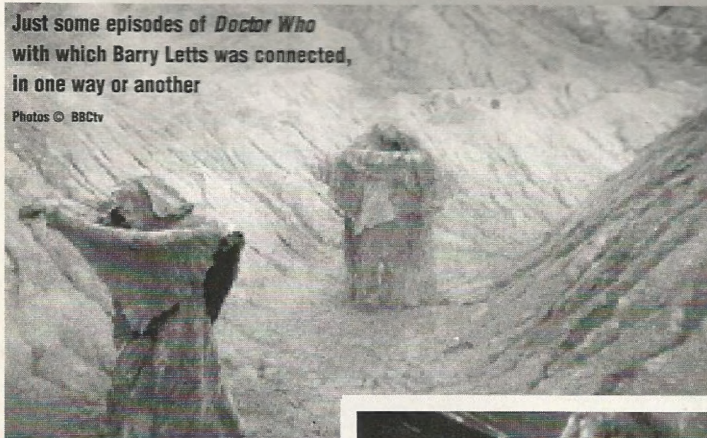
Departure and Return

Letts decided to move on when he found that "It was becoming increasingly difficult to bring something new to the show after four years. I'd taken over after Jon's first show, so it seemed logical that I would guide Tom through his first show and then hand over."

He soon returned to the show, though, to direct Baker in *The Android Invasion*. "I enjoyed it very much," he recalls. "It went well. One mistake I made, though, was

Just some episodes of *Doctor Who*
with which Barry Letts was connected,
in one way or another

Photos © BBCtv



taking out the scene explaining why the Doctor android turns up after the Doctor has turned them all off, people grumbled that it didn't make sense and it didn't without that scene!"

A Doctor in Crisis

Of his role in the eighteenth season Letts says, "I was technically executive producer of the show when Peter Davison was cast but it was entirely John Nathan Turner's choice and decision."

In later years, **Doctor Who** suffered a very public decline in quality and popularity which led to the Time Lord's early retirement in 1989. Letts, who admits to being a casual viewer, remains diplomatic while reflecting on the show's later years. "It's difficult to comment without sounding critical. John had a lot going for him as producer, I don't think the show would be the cult thing it is today without John, particularly in America. However, he was not as orientated towards straight-drama as his predecessors and I think that showed in the final product.

"To be honest, I think of all the Doctors the first four were better than the last three. I don't think anyone was bad, they're all good actors, but I personally would not have cast them."

Paradise and N-Space

Last year's Radio 5 play, *The Paradise of Death*, reunited Letts with Jon Pertwee, Elisabeth Sladen and Nicholas Courtney at the request of producer Phil Clarke, a firm fan of the Pertwee era

"It was a very happy reunion and went very well. I felt a bit constrained by the radio play because they said it was going to be six episodes and then made it five so the end was hurried — for example, Tragan was arrested and didn't get the nasty death he deserved — so I enjoyed expanding it for the novelization. I've also had some great royalties from the audio tape!"

Such was the success of *The Paradise of Death* that Letts is currently writing another adventure, *The Ghosts of N-Space*. "The radio version will be broadcast between January and February, with the book released in February. I'm up to Chapter 18 of about 27 of the book and then, when I've finished, I'll write the radio version. It seems to be going well, I find it very difficult to judge something I'm so involved in, but it's swinging along and I'm enjoying doing it."

Of the storyline, Letts offers these few tantalizing hints: "Well, there's somebody in it who turns up in the Doctor's present



Elisabeth Sladen, Jon Pertwee and Nicholas Courtney voice both *The Paradise of Death* and *The Ghosts of N-Space* Photo © BBC Enterprises

day who is also there at the beginning of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 16th Century. He's not a timelord, he's a human who has discovered the alchemist's secret elixir of life, but unfortunately he's a villainous character and using his powers for evil purposes."

Back to the Future

Earlier this year, reports suggested that **Doctor Who** would return in a Greenlight/Lumiere big-budget movie directed by Leonard Nimoy and written by Denny Martin-Flinn, co-author of **Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country**. Sadly, the production company's rights to Doctor Who expired before shooting commenced.

"When Terrance and I were over in LA for a convention in February, we were invited to have coffee with Leonard Nimoy and talked about it," Letts admits. "We got on very well, and I think it was very likely that had it gone ahead we might have been invited to be involved to a certain extent. He's a lovely man, very different from Mr Spock, but twice as clever as him.

"I said to him 'Are you going to direct or star in it, as we feel that you're the only American we would be happy playing it,' and he laughed and replied 'No, I enjoy directing far more than acting, but there's always the possibility that I

might search and search and come to the conclusion that the only one who could play the role was sitting in this chair!'"

As for the possibility of a new series of **Doctor Who** funded by Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, Letts remains optimistic.

"Nobody is going to commit themselves to a multi-million dollar budget without having some idea of what the Networks and the audiences want," he points out. "As far as Amblin doing it is concerned, I think the show moves on; one of the reasons it lasted for as long as it did was that it regenerated with the Doctors. Of course, the question is 'Can we trust the Americans to do it properly?' Well, you've just got to hold your breath and hope.

"One of the things about so many Science Fiction heroes is that they always win and never fail," Letts concludes. "The Doctor always wins in the end but he fails and fails along the way. He's got this lovely quirky element which means that you never know what he's going to do next: he could be irascible, he could be nasty, he could be angry, and at the same time funny and humorous. Yet, nevertheless, he is a true hero, somebody people can identify with and want to come out on top because he's morally right. If they hang on to that, there's no reason why it shouldn't work." ★